

I came to a new awareness the other day, the result of a highly charged phone conversation with my former wife which left me furious. Later, stumbling across a book about symbols in the library, I encountered a symbol for, and brief description of, Medusa, about whom the author said “could turn men to stone with her gaze.” Now I wasn’t turned to stone, tho indeed I found myself speechless with rage, and chose to try to examine all that energy suddenly constellated in my psyche and work with it, use it, understand it. I looked at it as if it were some foreign body or scientific/emotional investigation. I don’t know how far I got, but I came up with a notion which I tried out on a friend, that I just don’t speak Woman. Woman is a second language not taught at any school I’ve gone to. I speak Man. No matter how much I travel in Woman country, I’ll never know all the idioms, the jokes, the inside remarks, much less the nuances.

Coexisting—equivalent to asking where the post office is in a foreign country—will get you through the day—after a while you realize that’s not very much. To do more, I go cautiously, wanting to “do the right thing” by, for, to, with my woman.

Why? In the past I’ve felt that I couldn’t be spontaneous, that my male energy was just too gross, too crude, too immature to work in womanspace. Doing the right thing really meant not doing the wrong thing; hence I was defensive all the time. I’d be obsequious, hoping to avoid wrath, either in the form of some Medusa-like meltdown, or more likely in the form of being (perhaps politely) accused of acting like a MCP. At best, I was seen, though not forgiven for this deficiency, as clueless. To the extent that I couldn’t assimilate my disconnection with some conversation or process or situation, I’d be an escape artist, finding some way to avoid, withdraw, back off from the scene. Doing the right thing might have to go. I may have to rely on simple honesty and drop the pleaser crap.

Equally absurd may be my motivation to want to go “forward” or “make progress”. Going forward implies some goal, and the ones I’m used to (“avoid confrontation”, “avoid facing my feelings”) no longer mean anything. There’s no place to go to! I don’t need a goal! This may be simple to say, but it contradicts my entire non-verbal, non-structured, cultural training as a male.

Sexual behavior runs smack into sexual politics here. I’ve spent so many years training myself to withhold my sexual spontaneity to be sure my partner gets an orgasm first that I am dumbstruck when invited to ravage my partner’s body. *What?* Did I hear you correctly? Are you *nuts?* I’m being asked, or at least offered the chance, to break rules I’ve virtually converted my genetic makeup over decades of excruciating self-control to make. Rules I figured were as much a part of womancountry as PMS.

Jesus. If there are no rules, what is there? I’m male. Not only don’t I speak woman, I have my own proclivities, partly cultural, partly genetic, and to the extent I can divine them I know at least one spirals inward toward the word “order”, sucking “control” and “logic” and “balanced” along as companions into the center of my psyche. I have to have something, and the only thing I can carry with me into woman country are principles. Like complete honesty—brutal, painfully direct, no wimpoid-escapist-euphamistic

honesty. This is different than rude, but I get these two concepts mixed up translating them into real sentences said in person to real people. Actually, not just people. Women. Or, really, a specific woman. “Do you like my hair?” Jesus. If I say no, she’ll be hurt. If I say yes, I better mean it or I’ll be seeing it for years. Worst of all, if I say “It’s okay”, I might as well hand her the flamethrower.

Another principle is full disclosure. This stretches honesty to the place it needs to go. One can be honest and yet incomplete, intentionally leaving some gap to avoid what might seem like messy details. “How was the meeting?” “Oh, it was okay.” That may be honest, but it’s not complete, nowhere near complete. What about “Shit honey. Larry brought his new girlfriend, Ginger, who gave me a look that tore my clothes off. I went into a swoon and fantasized...” “You get the picture.

Another is: Listen Up! This means at least two things. Pay attention to now. Don’t wander into the future, the past, or the project you think you’d rather be working on. Don’t talk to her on the phone while you’re trying to finish an email. Don’t talk to her while your eyes are scanning the newspaper. The other is listen. Be there. Fully. Don’t be ready to talk talk talk. Just, simply, listen. And if you can’t, say so right up front. “I really need to talk to you”. “Ok, fine.” — then 3 seconds later you’re drifting off, drool forming just under your lower lip. Not good. Definitely not good. She can read your eyelashes at night in the fog at 100 yards. If she brings out the cattle prod, maybe you need it.

Another is letting go. Letting her be fully who she is. Giving her silence, space, sovereignty, privacy, independence. If you are jealous, don’t make it her problem. There’s a fine line here—cross over it into indifference and disinterest and plan on being a monk.

Am I in a relationship with a woman, or am I running on autopilot, cruise-controlling down the interstate of my life in some overloaded Buick, CD blasting away, aircon on max, oblivious to the feel of the road, the temperature of the air, the sound of the birds? Do I want to know who I am, who we are together, by glovelessly digging down into the soil, dirtying my hands with the worms of connections that will be smelly as well as fertile, attentive to the ground that mysteriously supports the life of our relationship, or do I want to hide behind the Superbowl, work, and being with the guys? I may not speak woman, but I dis myself if I’m afraid to try.